

A gold medical effort

Canada's Olympic MDs have a new approach to help our athletes reach the podium in Torino

By Mark Cardwell

Medically speaking, the upcoming Winter Olympics will make history no matter how many medals Canada wins.

That's because the 10 doctors who are accompanying Team Canada are geared up and equipped like never before to help as many of our athletes reach the podium as possible.

"There's no change in the way we treat injuries," says Dr. Bob McCormack, chief medical officer (CMO) of the Canadian contingent that will compete for nine days in Torino (Turin), Italy, beginning Feb. 10. "What's different is our strategic approach in terms of preparation and planning.

"It's all about performance now."

The big medical novelty at these Winter Olympics will be the first use of the Canadian Athlete Monitoring Program, or CAMP.

Conceived and developed over the past two years by a volunteer committee of blue-chip sports medicine specialists belonging to the Canadian Academy of Sports Medicine, CAMP is an Internet-based software system that allows doctors access to athletes' medical files anywhere in the world.

Dr. McCormack, an orthopedic surgeon and head of the division of arthroscopy and athletic injuries at the department of orthopedics at the University of British Columbia, is one of the committee's four members (the others are fellow Westerners Dr. Richard Backus of Victoria, Dr. Jack Taunton of Vancouver, who was also Canada's CMO at the 2002 Olympic Games in Sydney, and committee chairman Dr. Willem Meeuwisse of Calgary). Dr. McCormack says CAMP will help doctors better deal with the challenge of providing the best possible health care for elite athletes spread out across such a massive country as Canada.

"If I'm in Vancouver and I've got an athlete living in Quebec or competing at a competition in China, being able to access or upload or download or add information like the results of an MRI to their medical file allows me to provide them with a much greater continuity of care," he says.

That increased level of care, he says, also adds to an athlete's comfort level which, in turn, leads to better athletic performances.

"A huge part of sport is mental," said Dr. McCormack, a former track-and-field coach and star athlete who held the Canadian indoor track record in the 1,500 metres in the late 1970s and dreamed—albeit briefly, choosing instead to concentrate on his medical studies at Queen's University—of competing at the 1980 Olympics.

A team doctor for several Vancouver-area amateur and professional sports teams, including the B.C. Lions of the Canadian Football League, the 51-year-old has also been a team physician at several international sporting events, including the Pan American Games, the Commonwealth Games and two Olympic Games.

Most recently, he was assistant CMO at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens.

"Olympic athletes are superbly trained individuals," says Dr. McCormack. "The difference between gold and silver is little things."

While CAMP will be of some help in Torino, its benefits will be limited.

"(CAMP) is a work in progress," says Dr. McCormack. "It's going to be a very important tool—once we get all the bugs ironed out."

Funded jointly by the Canadian Olympic Committee, Sports Canada and the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Committee, CAMP is already the most expensive medical initiative ever undertaken in support of Olympic athletes in Canada.

The goal, explained Dr. McCormack, is to have CAMP running smoothly for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, where he will again be CMO of the Canadian contingent, and to have it perfected for the Winter Olympics in Vancouver in 2010, when Canada's stated goal is to finish first in the medal count.

"That's when it's going to help most," he says.

Still, Canadian Olympic expectations are high for next week's Games in Torino, too—and Team Canada's doctors are expected to play an important role in our athletes' success.

Canadian athletes have won 107 medals in nine winter sports on the World Cup circuits this season. Only Germany, with 120 medals in 11 sports, has done better.

As a result, Canadian Olympic officials are predicting our athletes will win 25 medals in Torino.

Those predictions haven't translated into results in recent Games, however.

According to a recent study, only 27% of Canadian athletes who were predicted to win a medal at the 2002 Games in Salt Lake City, where Canada finished fourth, did in fact win.

Other countries had a prediction-win rate of 64% at the same competition.

In an effort to improve that ratio in Italy, the Canadian Olympic Committee has developed structured "performance enhancement teams," which feature clusters of same-sport athletes in several cities.

Physicians, too, were picked for Team Canada not only for their skills and experience, but for their proximity to the clusters so they can get to know the athletes well.

"The new philosophy is: No new faces at the Games," says Dr. McCormack, who flew to Winnipeg recently to meet Canada's national men's curling team, for which he is the physician.

The other medical doctors on Team Canada include Dr. Julia Alleyne from Toronto (assistant CMO and head physician for the figure skating team); Dr. Jeff Purkis from Vancouver (freestyle ski team); Dr. Suzanne Leclerc from Montreal (short-track speed skating); Dr. Marnie Wesner from Edmonton (women's hockey team); Dr. Jim Thorne from Calgary (men's hockey team); Dr. Jim Demarco from Whistler, B.C. (men's ski team); and Dr. Bernie Lalonde from Ottawa (women's ski team).

The team's two "core physicians," Montreal's Dr. Susan Labreque and Dr. Connie Lebrun from London, Ont., will look after Canada's athletes in, respectively, sliding sports and snowboarding and cross-country skiing.

Many of the physicians have had previous Olympic experience. For some, however, it will be their first time at the world's most illustrious sporting event.

One of those rookies is Dr. Wesner.

A primary care sports physician and medical director of the non-profit Glen Sather Sports Medicine Clinic in Edmonton, she has worked with Canada's women's hockey team the past six years.

Although she has gone to several big sporting events (including the Pan-Am Games and international hockey tournaments) and travels regularly with the women's hockey team (an incredible 127 days this season alone), she is looking forward to Torino.

"I'm very excited," says Dr. Wesner, who, like most of the Team Canada physicians, flew to Italy earlier this week and will be away for almost a month.

"That's a long time to leave your practice," says Dr. Wesner. "That's the downside to all this; it's difficult on your colleagues."

In addition to dealing with colds, flu, jet lag and twisted ankles, Team Canada's doctors must be prepared to deal with the usual threats of winter competition, such as high-speed crashes, doping controversies, hockey-related concussions and speed-skating lacerations.

But they are also prepared—mostly through the work of Dr. McCormack who, as CMO, is the medical point man and main contact with Italian and Olympic health-care authorities—for everything from terrorist attacks to avian flu.

"We have to be ready for anything," says Dr. McCormack, who recently shipped ahead a container of medical supplies and drugs, including Tamiflu.

The doctors must also work in close co-operation with nutritionists, chiropractors and other athlete-sponsored members of Team Canada's 35-member "performance enhancing team," of which they are a part.

Included on the Torino team are 11 sports psychologists. That means for the first time in Canadian Olympic history, mental trainers will outnumber physicians.

While that may come as a shock to many, it doesn't surprise Dr. McCormack.

"Athletes are very resilient by nature, but they need coping skills for stress to deal quickly with adversity, like falling at the starting line of their first race," he says. "Many athletes have people they trust to help them deal with these situations, much like patients who feel more comfortable with their personal physician than with a GP at a walk-in clinic.

"That's the way things are now," adds Dr. McCormack. "We're going there to win."

Mark Cardwell is the Medical Post's Quebec City correspondent.